

## Commencement 2024

Good morning faculty, friends, families, Trustees, Board Chair, John Hazen White, Jr., students, and especially to you the fearless Class of 2024. Welcome to the Williston Northampton School's 183<sup>rd</sup> Commencement exercises. Also, a special thanks to our honored speaker this morning, from the Class of 2010, Tommy Reed—I'll say more about him later.

For those of you watching today on live stream, welcome, and we wish you could have been here with us. As we do every year, we gather under this tent on a gorgeous summer-like morning preparing to honor your achievements before you officially commence to the next stage of your young adult lives. Success is rarely solitary and

SO many people in the audience and those arrayed behind me helped get you to where you are today. In a Williston tradition, please stand seniors and face the audience to recognize your families and friends for all of their support and love. PAUSE. Please remain standing and let's turn and face and shout out this remarkable faculty who have guided you along the path in your Williston career. PAUSE. Thank you and you may be seated. Finally, and most importantly, please join me in a round of applause for the Herculean efforts of our physical plant and housekeeping staff and dining services who make this weekend work on our behalf.

Seniors-as I mentioned at your dinner last week, your high school years intersected with a unique moment in history. It's impossible

to stand before this audience on this day without mentioning how you persevered and overcame the shattering upheavals of the Covid-19 pandemic. None of us alive today have ever before experienced such a sudden and dramatic shutdown of society—across the globe. Our social fabric was torn, economic shock waves cascaded around the world, supply chain shortages became the norm, jobs disappeared while new ones were created—it was truly a historic time for you, the Class of 2024, to come of age. We know that there are profound and lasting effects from the pandemic’s disruption, ones that are hotly debated and will be for a long time. Also, as I shared in my letter to you, I hope you take to heart the quote by the great 20<sup>th</sup> century American poet, T.S. Elliott, when he cautioned us of the pitfall to “have the experience but miss the

meaning.” He meant by that, of course, each of us needs to reflect and re-reflect upon our lives, especially those that test our strength or beliefs. You are all wiser and stronger, more resilient and patient, and creative and courageous, than you would have been had you not been through the pandemic’s crucible.

I also wrote that letter so I could talk about something else today— other challenges that you have endured and that are on my mind—

So far, I am not sure that this sounds like an uplifting

Commencement talk. I’m supposed to be telling you that you are

heading off to lead consequential lives of success as change

makers or thought leaders, maybe even influencers. And that’s all

true, but along that road, you need to know what stands in your way,

to identify the obstacles that might block your path. This is not novel advice for teenagers, you hear it from parents, coaches, advisers, and friends. Think about some of those first driving lessons-- you are told to separate hazards, to avoid passing the double-parked Amazon van at the same time you see an oncoming cyclist. Stay alert, always be watchful, keep your head on a swivel-- sometimes threats sneak up on you, sometimes they are unseen and silent, sometimes they stem from your own risk taking.

But this morning, Class of 24, I'm talking about dangers that have become so familiar you don't think about them, ones that have blended into the matrices of our community—I am talking about **the three-year-olds on Williston's campus**. Like an explosion of

cicadas, our campus has been overrun by a swarm of three-year-olds, coming of age in your time here. Their grip on our community's quiet places and public spaces is undeniable. With deference to my colleagues, who are their parents after all, and with love in my heart (Kathryn Hill and I raised two children on boarding school campuses), I don't mean to exclude or single out any of your children, so the names and anecdotes I use are representative of their collective threat. It occurs to me that toddlers are misnamed, the name toddler does not fit the reality, the same way that cuddly little fluffy dogs are often the most ferocious.

Here are just a few examples of **MY** interactions, and I'm guessing you have had yours. I had a conversation with Maggie Garrity on the

quad the other day, she was armed head-to toe with plastic protection and was riding a scooter looking like she was a Mad Max war girl ready to run me down. When she paused in front of me, no matter what question I asked, she fired back, defiantly, “NO”—even when I asked her if “NO” was her favorite word, she said, dramatically, NO. Ahhh, three year old logic.

Hey, I said, to Anderson Talbot-Syfu, are you going to throw ALL of those landscaping stones into storm drain. He replied, “yes,” and got right back to work. So much for the school’s community value of respect.

Marigold was at the Williston Scholars presentations last week, getting an early jump on her project on non-GMO foods. She was digging into a cup of fruit with a plastic fork that she wielded with the dexterity of a ninja warrior, until she dropped it on the floor.

Improvising, as all three-year-olds do, she just drank the rest of the fruit cup, obscuring half her face. I asked her, “hey Marigold, what I should do with the fork” and she said, through the suction effect of the plastic cup-mask, “throw it in the garbage,” Mr. Hill—she could easily have added, “duhh”! but she’s way too polite.

As I said, it’s been some time since Mrs. Hill and I had our own “toddlers”—in fact we just attended our son’s college graduation on Monday and he sat where you are with the Class of 2019. So to be



sure things haven't changed that much since I parented a little one, I

did a little google search. Here's what I found on a reputable

Parenting site.

These are six prominent characteristics of three-year-olds.

1. Interrupting when you're talking
2. Playing too rough
3. Pretending not to hear you
4. Helping themselves to a treat
5. Giving a little attitude
6. Exaggerating the truth

The first and most prominent tab at the top of the web-site was titled, “Becoming a Parent,” and I thought to myself, good Lord, why would anyone want to click on that tab to become a parent based on the page’s opening content. But of course, you seniors were once your three-year-old-selves. **Your family behind you may be doing a mental check list right now as to how many of those six characteristics you have grown out of, or not.**

Did you already forget them? 1) Interrupting, 2) playing too rough, 3) pretending not to hear, 4) helping yourself to treats, 5) having an attitude, 6) exaggerating truth....

So, since graduation addresses ARE supposed to impart wisdom, mine is, **Don’t Be a Three-Year-Old**—How hard is that?

All of those six traits that I listed are pretty basic, and they fall under what is by now a very familiar idea to Williston graduates: our principal tenet of respect for self and others. Come to think of it, much of what I find so disturbing when I watch newsmakers in America today—people with big platforms like sports stars, movie icons, or members of Congress, to name but a few categories—is that they sound like three-year-olds. Think how many times during your Williston career some adult has pulled you aside to correct, guide, or steer you when had an attitude, pretended not to hear, played too rough, or exaggerated the truth. Those conversations all stemmed from the same place: to make you better versions of your three-year-old selves.

But the more I thought about my message for you this morning—the more I considered that it might not be so binary. There might be something missing with my saying “stop acting like a three-year-old” to a group of motivated, highly talented, and incredibly personable teenagers about to head off to college and other adult ventures.

Maybe there are some aspects of being three-years-old that aren’t so bad, that I should instead urge you to hold onto for the rest of your lives. How about these: an endless capacity for wonder, spontaneous joy and laughter, and a desire to bear hug the person nearest you are a few that come to mind. Three-year-olds engage in focused, screen-free, play with their toddler counterparts. They don’t dissemble, fake having good times, or dox one another.

As I said, Mrs. Hill and I attended our son's graduation on Sunday and the speaker, the United States Surgeon General, Vivek Murthy, said that relationships are the key to happiness, and he cited a bunch of scholarly studies bearing that out. Talk about authentic and unselfconscious relationships, check out Anderson and Kinsley on the disc swing—maybe we should all emulate them.

You seniors are being launched today into the unfamiliar, the new and exciting world of colleges and universities, all over the country and the world. The next time you see Dahlia, she might have a bit of a Scottish accent from Edinburgh; the next time you see Hammy and Monique they might be squaring off against each other on the ice; the next time you see Nic or Soleil, they might be on a Broadway

stage; or you might find Katie Spence painting a tiger in NJ, or Christian Defo and Connor Nizolek and Channing Doran leading a student organization at Union College.

Wherever you are headed, you are not the three-year-old selves that you once were—you have been shaped, influenced, and changed by the people and experiences that are Williston. While I urge you to shed the “worst” of your three-year-old selves, I also urge you to hang onto those aspects that have not been corroded by young adult concerns. Join in games with people you don’t know; laugh and giggle, embrace others unselfconsciously and without needing to add it to your reel. You, the Class of 2024 have handled adversity and come through it stronger than ever, and so use your moment in

history to commit to building relationships across differences—we are very proud of you and eager to see what comes next. Thank you.

